

**Summit of the Americas and relations with Cuba**

**By Sam Farr**

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**Earlier this month you accompanied President Barack Obama to Port of Spain, Trinidad for the Summit of the Americas, stopping in Mexico City on the way. What was accomplished on this trip?**

Nothing less than a revolution in our relations with countries in the region. We're a partner now. We listen now. In effect, the summit put the United States back into the Americas.

Over the last several years, the United States alienated so many Latin American countries through isolationist policies that we effectively lost whatever influence we once had in the region. And what an important region it is.

Three of our top trading partners are Latin American nations, accounting for about 15 percent of international trade. For California, trade with Mexico is even more important, totaling around \$20 billion. And for years now, Hispanics have been the largest minority group in the United States.

So why do we need to make sure our government has influence in Latin American countries? The list draws in some of the most pressing issues our country faces.

Unauthorized immigration is still a hot-button issue and will continue to be one until we adopt comprehensive immigration reform. We must not only bring immigrants out of the shadows, we must also confront the reasons for illicit immigration. If we ignore poverty in Latin America -- the main driver for unauthorized immigration -- we will continue to face the same problems.

Drug and gun violence along the Mexican border and in Central America is another problem quickly gaining attention north of the border. Fueled by drugs and aggravated by the illegal cross-border flow of assault weapons, this looming crisis must be addressed. But it will take cooperation between Mexican and U.S. officials.

On the way to the Summit of the Americas we stopped off in Mexico City where the President Obama had a productive meeting with President Calderon. They both understand that to cure the problems both our countries face, we must address the root causes of poverty.

Those are just two of the many issues on which we're beginning to engage Latin American governments. There are dozens more, the largest of which is how to jumpstart our regional economy.

Under President Obama, the United States has shown its willingness to work with our neighbors, not against them. I expect this year will be an exciting one for improved relations with our neighbors.

**You have long been a proponent of normalizing U.S. relations with Cuba, and delivered a letter to the President, signed by 47 members of Congress, outlining a plan to do so. What is your proposed plan, and why is it important that it be enacted?**

The issue of normalizing relations with Cuba has been simmering for quite some time.

President Obama promised during his campaign to quickly lift restrictions on family travel and remittances sent to the island, and he did so in the run-up to the summit. This was an important first-step -- the first of many.

The letter I delivered to the president on Air Force One laid out a 10-step plan that will transform our failed policy of isolation. For five decades our government has tried to shut Cuba off from the world, and for five decades that policy has failed.

But we're finally seeing some cracks in the wall.

Fidel Castro resigned from office. Limited reforms are being implemented by Raul Castro, who has said he is open to a dialogue with America. And more members of Congress are stepping up and demanding change.

The letter I passed to the president calls for further loosening of restrictions on travel and remittances, which would complement legislation currently moving through Congress. The letter also calls for reforming our trade policy toward Cuba. Current trade rules implemented under President Bush were meant to further strangle the Cuban government. Instead, the Cuban people have been hurt the most. That's not how we support democracy.

Finally, the letter lays out several items related to security and international relations. These are intended to nudge Cuba toward cooperation on anti-terrorism efforts, immigration policy, drug trafficking and more. One of the first steps should be to readmit Cuba to the Organization of American States. Countries in the region want it and we should stop standing in the way.

The bottom line is we must engage the Cuban government. Isolation has failed us, so let's give diplomacy a chance. The best way to foster democracy in Cuba is to expose their people to our way of life. That process must begin in Washington, and I look forward to moving us in that direction.